

Recorded Interview with Mike Wilson

Date: 7/15/2010

Location: Toledo, Oregon

Interviewer: Christina Package

CP: Can you tell me a little bit about how you got involved in the fishing industry?

MW: I was born and raised in Waldport. My dad was an auto mechanic. I actually headed to Alaska running away from what everyone else thought I should do. I was highly recruited out of high school for baseball. I had a professional baseball team looking at me. I got a little lippy with a collegiate coach on an interview and the word got out that I was uncoachable, that I had an attitude. So, I just thought screw all you people. I hopped in my truck and I headed to the end of the road. I took a buddy with me. I had no idea about where I was going or what I was doing. I was just going. I ended up in Homer and there was a boat sitting there. The skipper said he was going to Kodiak. I said 'We're going to Kodiak'. They didn't tell us it wasn't coming back for six months. So here we are stuck over here in Kodiak and we decided we needed to get a job, you know. I ended up in a cannery. I started out back in crab, in the butcher shop. I was there only two hours and I caught in the corner of my eye the guy who hired me standing there pointing at me with another guy. I thought I was doing something wrong. Now, I had a mound of crab in front of me twice the size of anyone else and I thought I was doing them wrong. I never really worked for anybody other than my dad. So the boss took me off of crabbing and made me a foreman on the first day. So I started running the machine that offloaded finished crab. I did that for about two weeks. Then, he needed a tune up done on his car and he also saw on my application that I had worked in an auto shop. So he wanted to know if I knew how to tune up a car. I tuned it up and the next day I got a tap on the shoulder and he said 'That car wasn't running that good when it was new. I got a new job for you.' So, he put me on maintenance. I said 'what's that?' He said 'You basically sit up there and drink coffee until something breaks and then you get to work.' Well, I wasn't much of a clock rider. If there is something to do I want to be doing it. Nothing was broke down that day and I ended up helping the unloaders. There was a boat unloading crab and so down I went. The next day, that boat owner showed up looking for that big red-headed guy. He needed a deck hand. I didn't know anything about that. He said, 'Well, none of us know how to do it until we try it.' So, I went out and I was promised no pay. No pay. He said 'If you work out, we will talk about pay after the trip. If you don't work out, we will give you something for the trip and we will get rid of you.' So, I go out there and I have never been yelled at. Holy shit. My coaches were a piece of cake compared to how I was

getting yelled at. Holy shit. I didn't know squat from nothing. I got sea sick. I thought I worked my ass off.

So I go out and make this fishing trip and I have never quit anything in my life. You can fire me. That is your choice. It ain't mine. So we are on our way to town and I am thinking 'Holy shit, I hope I get fired. I getting find a way to get fired because this is tough. I thought I was tough. Nope.' So we are about an hour out of Kodiak and I get a call from the skipper and the owner to come up stairs. I get upstairs and he says 'I've been fishing a long time and I have never run across a situation like this before. What I am going to do is pay you top share. You are one of the workenest guys I've ever had on my boat. I'm thinking 'Shit. You mean I'm not fired'. So I go back downstairs and I am thinking 'Oh man. This may be the first time I have to quit.' So we get to town and I have no money because I had to buy all the gear to go on the trip. So, I asked one of the other crewman if I could borrow \$20. He says, 'For what?' I says 'To eat.' He says, 'The foods on the boat.' I says 'We aren't working. I can't eat the guy's food'. He says, 'No, no. It don't work that way. You are on the boat, you eat the boat's food.' He wouldn't lend me the \$20. So I didn't eat. The next day the owner came up to me and handed me a check. He said, 'Why didn't you say you needed money?' I said, 'Well, I had only been working here for 4 days. That ain't right.' He said 'You can have a draw anytime you want. You will get paid on the 30<sup>th</sup> of every month.' So he hands me this check. I hand it back and say 'Somebody made a mistake with this'. He says 'No. That's a draw check.' I said 'How much of this do I share with them other guys?' He says 'None.' I said 'Well how much did I make?' He said 'Well, figure it out. You make 10% of the gross dollars of what we delivered.' I said, 'You mean \$5,000 for four days? I can do this again.' Them guys can yell at me all they want. There is not a problem here.'

Back in those days, they didn't teach you nothing. You learned to do it by getting yelled at. It was do it and do it fast. You will learn as you are going. One of the guys on the boat who was there for a while and I got to know him well. He was an ex Marine who did three tours in Nam. He was a Platoon leader for a unit that was behind enemy lines. He had probably killed a few people. Probably a few with his hands, a few with a gun and a knife. One day he was sitting on a bucket while I was running the hydraulics. My job was to come out were the hydraulics were and get the line and put it on top of the pots. Well, he was sitting down on this bucket and I ran into it and fell over and got a bit warm. I had a reputation for getting into scuffles when I first moved here to Kodiak. So, I started in on him saying 'You lazy S.O.B. You sit on this bucket and you are supposed to be this big tough Marine. You are sitting down on the job.' He turns to me and says 'You are just being childish.' I said, 'You want to step behind this pot here and I'll tell you what childish is.' He says, 'You want to fight?' I hit him a few times and threw him overboard. We got him back on the boat and he went in and cleaned all up. He put new gear on and came out and we never spoke another word. We eventually became very good friends.

Anyways, I was there for two years and the guy I was working for and his brother were building a new boat. They both had little boats. They picked a crew for the big boat and I was chosen as

the engineer. I got more pay. I spent about 9 months in Alabama building that boat. We brought it up from Alabama. The two brothers had gotten in a fight down in Alabama. Anyhow, to make a long story short I ended up teaming up with one of the brothers on 3 or 4 boats over 30 years. Ted Painter is his name. In 1980 or 1981, I was running another boat. I had been on the Trailblazer. I ended up quitting. Yeah, I guess quitting. I was not sure what I was going to do next. Ted approached me saying he was going to retire. He was only 38. He said 'you want to take over the Alaska Trojan?' I took 25 percent of it and then in 1989 we brought it down here and cut it in half and added 20 feet to it. We were still filling it up fast even though we had another tank. Then we built the Kiska. A year later we built the Siberian Sea. Two years ago we sold the Kiska to Aleutian Sprays Fisheries and I am going to stay around for a while. In the meantime I boat another boat. We fished north pacific albacore and that is kind of a corrupt fishery. You got to be on the A list out of San Diego to get anything done. So, we took it to Hawaii and set up a long line for the big eye tunas. We started that two years ago.

Since I was making a shit ton of money up here, my brother came up. My father sold his business and moved up here. My dad came up and worked on deck with us on the Trailblazer and made enough money start another mechanics shop. My brother is now running a boat, the Cornelia. He used to run the Lady Kodiak. Then he went over to the Lady Aleutian. Then he ran the Incentive, which I think they recently renamed to the Insatiable or some damned thing. These are all Kodiak boats. He got in with the wrong crowd to start. Drugs messed with a lot of boats in those days and he got caught up in that. He eventually got on my boat. The white drugs were readily available back then. There was so much money floating around. Young kids had a lot of money. I mean you would see young kids who couldn't even drive having brand new pick ups sitting in the driveway until they could drive. Salmon seasons were good. Shrimping was phenomenal. Kids who were 15 years old would go fishing for salmon with their dada's in the summer and bring home \$25,000. You know. Holly crap. That's a lot of money. It was the Wild West. Back in the day. I went up in 1976. I had no idea where I was going. Just going. Either way. My buddy ended up staying at the cannery and eventually he got on with us on the Buccaneer. That's pretty much my story. I'm sticking to it. [laugh]

CP: Was the drug problem there because of the money?

MW: Yeah, pretty much. If there is money like that there is going to be drugs. That's the bottom line. There is nothing else to spend you money on. When you are fishing and fighting all the time, and drinking. I am too much of a red neck. I like to fight. If you are all messed up, you are going to get your ass kicked. I had quite a reputation for banging people around because I could. I got in a fight when I was 23. I was 3 time state champion shot put and discus thrower. I threw phenomenal distances, for back then. I had quite an arm. That was what everyone wanted from me. I had a good arm and so I could throw a good punch. If you don't knock me out your in big trouble.

CP: What was Kodiak like during that time?

MW: I mean, there was the law, but they didn't get involved. Crazy stuff went on up there. Between the drinking and the partying and the carrying on, it was a wild place. There are two guys who were so bad ass that they could eat glass. They would sit at the bar and eat their glass. There a lot of people from this Lincoln County area that went to Kodiak. The Halls, the Painters, they were all there. Back then the funnest time was at Christmas time. You just had massive Christmas get-togethers. From one house to the next. There was a really community feel among these Lincoln County people up there. They had the fisherman's wives club.

CP: Were you mostly crabbing up there?

MW: Yeah. I didn't do any dragging. My philosophy of dragging is if you want to drag, go out in the woods and pulls logs. I don't know about doing that on the ocean. We did all the crab species and then with Alaska Trojan we did halibut and cod. That was pretty much it. Crab, halibut, and black cod.

A number of things happened. When the Banks and Stevens Act came in it pushed foreigners out 200 miles and they were supposed to be out there cod fishing, but we know they took tons of halibut too. What got us into halibut was when the Bering Sea king crabbing went on its butt. You got do something to survive. I had been out on the edge out at Chiniak on that last king crab season and I was getting about 20 halibut per pot. I was thinking, we can catch them in a crab pot. Halibut was easy to fish for. We migrated out into the Bering Sea. I stuck it out in Kodiak until 1990 or 1991.

CP: What your opinion on rationalization?

MW: Well, I am a want to win kind of guy. When you leave the dock knowing what you are going to catch, the only thing you have to brag about is getting home before someone else. But, the IPQ thing is a mess. I mean I know they wanted to do something because of how the halibut were doing. But, who is going to come in and put that kind of money into building a crab processing plant when you don't know from one year to the next if you are going to even have a season. It's different for the halibut. You can sit on that halibut for a while. You can ship it off and put it in the freezer. But, once those crabs are in the tank, you have only got so long before you have to deliver them or throw them out which you ain't going to do. You are going to sell them to the plants that are already there and established. The IPQ is just wrong. Our prices have just gone down, down, down, down, down. Yeah the economy is poor, but I think they could do a better job in their marketing. As far as the IFQ, it really hasn't made it safer because the plants put so much pressure on us for timely deliveries. You know. If you miss delivery, the price drops. My feeling is the reason that statistics shows there are no sinkings is because those boats that have sunk are already on the bottom. They were going to sink anyway, or they are at the dock because they know they were going to sink. We had 300 boats out there in the heyday of the red crab. We are down to 60 or 65 boats. The boats that don't belong out there aren't out there so they can't sink. So the statistics are all 'Well, there haven't been any sinkings.' You can

taint it any way you want. I have been driving them rigs since 1982 and I have never had a guy hurt. I made a lot of money owning the shares. EDRs are gonna put tax. There will be a tax on the IFQ, without a doubt. Once they get all the data from the EDR figured out and they figure out exactly what guys are making, they will say 'Oh we can't have that.' So there will be a tax. That's one of the reasons that we sold the Trojan. It was because the capital gains tax were the lowest they have ever been in our lifetime and probably as low as they will ever be. If you were going to sell, it was before Obama came in. Because now it is taxes, taxes, taxes. I have mixed emotions about IFQ.

CP: So you are still involved in boats?

MW: No, I sold everything. I got divorced about 5 years ago and I decided I just wanted a simpler life.

CP: Do you think Oregon guys still get their start in fishing by going to Alaska?

MW: No. No. Nope. There are not too many new guys coming in. You have to have money to buy your way in. Everything is locked up with IFQs. There are just not that many kids who want to get involved in the fisheries. These IFQs, you know, it's the owners who make out. They take out a huge lease rate. The reason you got paid what you did back then was because you risked your life. With the IFQs, everybody thinks it's safer so they don't have to pay you as much. But, you still have to go do the job. There are just less people out there doing it. A lot of these owners who don't fish anymore got the crab rights all tied up, they sit home and put the money in their pocket and don't do anything. They just lease it out. For new people from here going up there, it impossible. You have your occasional person who has the connection, but back then kids used to go up and work on a processor for the summer. They just don't do that anymore. Now it's all Mexicans and Filipinos working in the processors. The cost of living is higher and the wages are the same as they were 20 years ago. There just is not as much money to take home as there was back then. We don't see a lot of new skippers coming up in our ranks either. There is going to be time when it is going to be tough to find guys to even run the boats. We got chopped. There are not guys waiting in the wings like there used to be. The IFQs really cut out the crewman. It's tough to find guys. You used to have guys standing in line. I have been getting resumes from kids all over the country.

When we lived in Alaska it was mostly guys from Alaska who were crewman on our boats. We took some guys up there from here. Now, right now we are fishing for a highly migratory species and in the Jones Act it states that you can use foreign labor when fishing for highly migratory species that cross into international waters. Those tunas, like I was mentioning earlier. If you don't know what you are doing you can turn a \$5,000 fish into a \$500 fish if you don't know what you are doing. There is a certain way they have to bleed them, a certain way you spike them, a certain way you clean them. So these Pilipino guys come out of a fisherman's union where they are taught how to do all of this. They will sign a year contract to come over on a boat

for a year. When they are in town they are confined to the vessel. They cannot get off. In Hawaii they let them get off and be in what they call the fishing village. It's two piers length. They can go boat to boat and visit, but can't be caught outside the fence. They will be shipped back and will never be able to come back and it costs us \$25,000. So, we have church on the boat. They bring everything, and 40 to 50 people will have a big old get-together and put the tent up, get the guitars going, have the sermon, and then it's just the biggest barbeque you have ever seen in your life. I can go to bed at 2am on one of these BBQ nights and get up at 6am and you wouldn't know there was one person on your boat. I mean there is not a scrap of food, not a beer bottle cap, all the dishes are done, I mean it is just immaculate. I mean their contracts are for \$400 a month. That's bullshit. Our guys averaged about \$1200. We doubled their contract and had all kinds of bonuses. The iceman got a bonus, the cook got a bonus, and if you didn't cause any trouble by being a shit head on deck, you got a bonus. We would put bonus hooks on the line and if a fish was caught on those hooks it was the crewman's fish. The boat takes no cut. There was one night were we only caught 3 big tunas. All three came up on those crew hooks. There was \$7,000 split between them. I had wives call on the phone just crying, you know, saying 'You are a gift from god. You changed our lives. Our home is your home.' I mean they send stuff all the time. They are really appreciative. They always ask if they can go to Alaska on the big boats. I have to say 'You can't go guys. You can only fish on the Hawaii stuff'. When I sold the boat and made sure that the new owner kept those guys. They are really dedicated. They asked me to tell them how to run it since I had run it for twenty years, so they listen to what I have to say.

CP: What else would you like to add about your experience fishing up in Alaska?

MW: One thing the general public needs to know is this. You know, you run into these tree-hugger kinds of people and I ran into one last year and I had to set her straight. The issue was overfishing. Overfishing. It's kind of like global warming. You know global warming has been going on for 300 million years. It's a progression for Christ sake. There is nothing we can do about it. Those kind of people just set me off. Anyway, back to overfishing. I don't want to be a pig farmer. I am a fisherman. I don't kill my babies. One of the things I watch on that Deadliest Catch. Man, I have to chew some ass. I see them stacking pots with crabs in the pot. The crab is going to die. He's going to freeze to death you dumb shit. That's what we need to catch next year. The department wants to put 27 percent mortality rate on us and I can guarantee you that on my boat, other than what I don't know about stuff going on under water, I don't kill my babies. No crab will be left in the pot. I got side tracked again. Back to overfishing. The department sets a god damned quota [pounding on desk]. If we don't exceed the quota how, how are we as fisherman overfishing it? You know, they want to blame us fisherman. They say 'You rape, pillage, and plunder. You are nothing but a bunch of pirates.' Don't get me started. Ok, lady, there are about 900 square miles in the Bering Sea, the state and the federal government survey the ocean floor and know how many crab there are. We get to fish about half of them. How did I overfish it? They tell me how many I can catch. I had nothing to do with setting the amount. I am just doing what they tell me I can do. I said to her 'If you want to get pissy with me, got talk to

the people who make the numbers up.’ It ain’t the fisherman. They just do not understand. Until we as fisherman join together and start educating the damn public about how this all happens, they won’t know. They just say ‘I boycott tunas. I boycott tunas’. That is one of the healthiest fish you can eat. ‘I am boycotting shrimp’. Why are you boycotting shrimp? ‘Oh it is just such a dirty fishery.’ Well how do you know they aren’t farm raised? ‘Oh, that would be even worse. You don’t know what they are feeding them’. I mean these freaking people. They ain’t educated. Let’s spend some money to educate them. You know. Put a tax on it. Everything else seems to get taxed. Pretty soon you are going to get taxed for crapping. The airlines now want to charge you for using the bathroom on the airline.

CP: What do you think creates this public misunderstanding that you are talking about?

MW: I think a bunch of it is the non-discriminatory fisheries. The worst thing, the absolute worst thing the government did was the outlaw of the use of black cod pots because it is selective. A hook is not selective. Anything that comes along and hits that hook is going to get caught. The black cod pot is designed to catch black cod. It was just really rare to find other fish in those pots. They rarely go in there. It was the little boats that didn’t have the pots that were screaming and hollering. If I am pulling a one inch line and that pot hits another boats line it will snap off, so the dragging can be a problem. You try to be selective, but stuff happens. There is a tremendous amount of waste when things go wrong. There have been improvements with the design of these nets, but I don’t think the public gets educate. Things are getting better. We have non-trawling areas to protect certain species. There is nothing right about 900,000 species dying during a quarter because of stupid dragging.

It’s been a good living. Still dangerous. You push to the edge. Being as competitive as I am, it was the absolute perfect occupation for me. But, I do sit back sometimes and wonder what if? What if I kept my mouth shut in that coach’s office? I just don’t know where my future would have taken me. I have no regrets, but who knows. Here I am today just nursing some wounds. But, I saved a guy’s boat for him and that’s what counts.

CP: So could you talk a little bit about how the fisheries have changed over time?

MW: Everything is cyclic. I don’t care how good of a job the scientists think they do, they only thing that matters is who is up there above us because global conditions, ocean conditions....You know that is the thing that really bothers me. Most of us are not educated. We are just hard workers and we are good at what we do. We have been in the business a long time and you start paying attention. Like I said, I don’t want to be a pig farmer. I don’t want to kill my babies. I want to be in this for a while, so you watch things. For instance, the ling cod are back. Look at the Dungeness crab. The ling cod are eating the crab. The ling cod disappear, the crab come back up. Now we are catching ling cod. Everybody is getting ling cod in the dungy pots. Ling cod are back. So, ocean regime shift. I believe it. Two things I learned growing up around here. Number one. The sardines were fished in the 1940s and then not again until 1990 or 1992. One scientist

had the balls get up and say, you can't know that. We didn't manage them. We didn't know. We thought they had gone extinct. Ocean regime shift brought them back. Razor clams. Back when it was clockwise currents in the North Pacific most of the spawns came from the Long Beach area and works its way down the coast. Anywhere you went as a kid there were razor clams. In the late 1980s if you went out for razors, you would be happy if you came back with 3 or 4. Now if you go down there, you can pick them up with your bare hands. Basically anywhere there is sand, there are clams. Hum. I wonder what happened. Well maybe when the ocean was counter clockwise all the spawn went north and once you get up past long beach its all rocky coast line up there. Where is the razor clam going to take hold. Nowhere. Now since the currents have turned they are coming back to the south. The spawn is now in the south so we have razor clams again. Ain't no scientist can create that. It's cyclic.

Another example, they pissed and moaned about the logging wiping out the creeks. Well, silver salmon are up here on the surface to maybe 30 or 40 feet. The Chinook salmon are deeper. All of a sudden, there are no silver salmon. The seasons are closed. They are not coming. There are tons of Chinook salmon. Well, blame it on the logging for wiping out the spawning beds. Well, let's see. That same salmon, that silver and the Chinook, spawn in the same spawning beds in the same god damned river that you are saying there are no spawning beds. I don't think it's the rivers problem. It's in the ocean. Something in that water column in that depth is gone, so the silvers aren't here. It's not the rivers fault. Another thing is that ducks go up to the freshwater spawning spots on the river and eat the fish. They almost to the hatchery. Back in the day, we used to shut the duck so they wouldn't do that. But now you can't do that. In Alsea Bay there are about 3,000 Harbor seals in there. Unbelievable. There was a point where they talked about killing a bunch of them. They eat a lot of the fish coming out of the river. What is good for one species is bad for another. You know what, it might change around and what was good for the one that had it good is no longer. It is just so cyclic out there. Us fisherman spend a lot of time out there. More than the scientists. We may not have all the book knowledge, but we have a lot of experience.